

Sunday, June 29, 2025 | Filled

Week 13 | Acts 4:23-31 | “Prayerful Boldness”

READ: Acts 4:23-31 (ESV)

²³ When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’—²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

In today’s passage, we’ll study one of the earliest prayers of the church. It comes at a crucial time. The church had grown from 120 to thousands on the Day of Pentecost. Then, it grew even larger after a man was healed of his lameness, and Peter took the opportunity to proclaim the gospel. Following this, the Sanhedrin imprisoned, questioned, and then released the apostles, threatening them not to teach or preach in Jesus’ name.

Without question, this prayer comes at a pivotal moment in Church history. Not only that, but it also provides us with a portrait of how the earliest Christians, with remarkable courage, coped with difficult, often confusing situations. It isn't a very long prayer, but do not mistake its brevity for superficiality. It is rich in its theology, moving in its content, and inspiring in its outcome.

In this prayer, we can see that God is...

i. Vs. 23-24a - The Lord of lords

Vs. 23-24a – Luke says, “When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.” Notice the apostles sought the comfort

of fellow believers. Though the world assails the church, the believer finds rest and encouragement in the community of faith. This is why **Hebrews 10:23-25** says, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:23-25). We need one another to help us “the confession of our hope without wavering.” We need one another if we are to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” We cannot help each other if we neglect “to meet together.” We ought to “encouraging one another.” Why? Why is meeting together regularly so important? Why should church be a non-negotiable when it comes to your schedule? Because we “see the Day drawing near” when the end of the world will come. After being released from prison, Peter, John, and the formerly lame man needed warmth and encouragement from the church. After being surrounded by the world, feeling like you're hemmed in on all sides of the world, we need the church to help get us through this life until Jesus Christ returns.

So, the church has heard the threat. They know that to preach, teach, or perform miracles in Jesus' name is now a crime. The apostles had been warned, charged, and threatened. How should the church respond? They prayed. Luke says, “When they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord...”

They begin by calling God their “Sovereign Lord.” This is a title that speaks of God's lordship. None are greater than him, and no one can usurp his authority. God is in power and in control. This threat by the Sanhedrin did not come as a surprise to him. And the church knew that they needed help from the Lord of Lords when one of the lords of the earth contradicted God's divine decrees to go into the all the world and make disciples.

ii. Vs. 24b - The Creator of Everything

Vs. 24b – The Christians referred to God as the One “who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.” Creation is the property of the Creator. This is what makes him the Lord of Lords. He made us. As such, we are his rightful property, and he is our rightful ruler. Psalm 110:3 says, “Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.” Provided I'm not breaking any laws, no authority has the right to tell me how to raise my kids. As a father, I get to make the decisions that I think are best for my children. Why? Because I am their small “c” creator. Without me, they would not exist, and as such, I have every right to tell them what to do and how to do it. If this is true in the home, how much more is it true in creation?

iii. Vs. 25a - The Author of Scripture

Vs. 25a – The Church is about to quote Psalm 2:1-2. But, before they do, they first refer to God as the One “who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit.” There is a lot packed into this. David is the author of Psalm 2. But he did not compose that psalm by himself. It was “by the Holy Spirit” that he came to craft the words of the psalm. So much so that it was “through the mouth of our father David, your servant” that God spoke.

Another way of thinking about it is that God, by the Holy Spirit, spoke with David's accent. This means that though the book of the Bible was written and composed by human hands, its contents are so divinely inspired that they are literally the very words of the Almighty. 2 Peter 1:20-21 says,

“Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

The Bible is not a book of man but the infallible, inerrant, preserved, and perfect word of God.

iv. Vs. 25b-27 – The Anointed of the Lord

Vs. 25b-27 – Quoting from Psalm 2:1-2, the church said, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.” This is a messianic psalm. The Lord's "Anointed" refers both to Israel's kings, such as David, but also to the King of all kings, the Messiah—i.e., Jesus Christ. At its heart, Psalm 2 discusses the futility of attempting to oppose God's reign. It says that the Lord actually “laughs” at any plans of sedition. Anyone who thinks that they can usurp God's authority is a joke to God.

But this joke doesn't really have a funny punchline. Because, someday, all who do not bow the knee to the divine King will be broken “with a rod of iron” and dashed into “pieces like a potter's vessel.” Considering this, the advice at the end of the Psalm should not be ignored:

“Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps 2:10–12).

The early church could not help but see parallels to their current situation. Just as the world raged against God's anointed back then, so it raged against the Messiah today. They say, “For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you

anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel.” Since Cain killed Abel, the world has always been at odds with God and those who follow God. This was true of the Israelites while they were enslaved in Egypt, and now, it is true of Christians. Of course, the irony is that believers are the ones being persecuted by the Jews, God's chosen people! As the Israelites rejected Christ, so they opposed Christians. The early believers saw themselves as part of a long line of followers of God who had been rejected by the world (cf. Matt. 5:12).

But it wasn't just the Jews who had rejected Jesus. The early church also mentioned King “Herod,” “Pontius Pilate,” and “the Gentiles.” All are arrayed against the Lord's “Anointed.” By either actively killing Jesus or not actively trying to stop the murder of an innocent person, all are guilty before God for the death of God's Son. Though the Lord loved the world so much that he sent his only son to die and pay the penalty for the world's sin, the sin still views God as its enemy.

v. Vs. 28 – The Director of History

Vs. 28 – The Christians admitted that those who rose up against Jesus were permitted “to do whatever [God's] hand and [God's] plan had predestined to take place.” “Predestined” is God's foreordination of future events. Terms such as “foreknowledge” and “foretelling” are integral to this understanding.¹ These terms speak about God's absolute control and knowledge of all things. Because God knows the course of history, he can direct its way with his “hand” and according to his “plan.” So much so that nothing has occurred or will occur that God did not either permit or cause to take place.

What happened to Jesus is precisely what God wanted to happen. But, make no mistake, just because God “predestined” what took place does not mean that Pilate, Herod, the Sanhedrin, the Jews, and the Gentiles are not liable for Jesus' death. Do not confuse predestination and foreknowledge with determinism (e.g., a robot vs. a man). Yes, God knows what we will do, and so those choices are unavoidable. However, they are still our choices, not his, and as such, God will not have to give an account of our choices; we'll have to answer for the deeds we do.

Like a Grandmaster playing a game of chess with a novice, God knows the moves we'll make without moving the pieces for us. Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” The Lord *incorporates* our choices without *causing* them to accomplish his will. We throw the dice, but God decides the outcome. If it were otherwise, then

¹ Bock, Darrell L., *Acts*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 208.

we would no more be accountable for our actions than a gun is accountable for murdering someone. God does not cause such things; fallen human beings do. Nevertheless, the wonder of God's sovereign control over history is this: *he uses bad things to accomplish good things* (cf. Gen. 50:20). And there is no better illustration of this than the crucifixion. God directs the progression of history, both the good and bad, to accomplish what he has predestined or foreordained to take place.

vi. Vs. 29 – The Giver of Opportunities

Vs. 29 – After rooting their prayer in God's sovereignty and recounting current events, the church comes to their request. They pray, “*And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness...*” They did not pray for protection? Rescue? Vengeance? *They wanted more opportunities to speak and to speak with boldness.* They tried to remain faithful despite opposition.² Throughout the rest of Acts, the church is characterized by its boldness (cf. 9:27, 29; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8).

To be clear, boldness, in a Scriptural sense, is more about conviction and confidence than bravado and composure (cf. Heb. 3:6; 1 Jn. 2:28). The believer should never be belligerent with the truth, as if it were a bat to beat their opponent over the head. Nor should every believer be loud, all full of bluster and swagger. *Peacefully but uncompromisingly holding to the Scriptures is bold enough.* A Christian does not have a chip on his shoulder, but neither does he back down from a fight when truth is being attacked.

Peter said, “*Have no fear of [those who persecute], nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame*” (1 Pet. 3:14b-16). So, the Church in Jerusalem was praying for boldness, not brashness. They wanted to stand for the truth in a way that did not compromise it, speaking it gently and respectfully.

vii. Vs. 30 – The Performer of Miracles

Vs. 30 – Though the situation was dire and the church needed boldness, they did not doubt that God was still at work. They ended their prayer by admitting that they knew that while they proclaimed the gospel, the Lord would “*stretch out [his] hand to heal, and signs and wonders*

² Bock (2007), p. 209.

[would be] performed through the name of [his] holy servant Jesus.” God still works and wins, even when the world rages against him.

In Dan. 4:34-35, after Nebuchadnezzar regained his senses, he “blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”

viii. Vs. 31 – The Granter of Prayers

Vs. 31 – Luke tells us, “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” To be clear, this isn't a second Pentecost or evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. These believers were already filled with the Holy Spirit, as mentioned in Acts 2. To say that they were “filled with the Holy Spirit” here means they were endowed with the power to do what they were requesting—i.e., “to speak the word of God with boldness.” This demonstrates that while every believer receives the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; Rom. 8:9; Eph. 1:13-14), we still need to submit ourselves to God so that we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to do with work of God. When we are filled with the Spirit, we'll not fulfill the lusts of the flesh (cf. Eph. 5:18). In this case, the believers, rather than giving into fleshly cowardice, prayed and were thus filled with the Holy Spirit, thereby enabling them to preach the word confidently and courageously. Though we are indwelt by the Spirit, we still need to be filled by the Spirit; that is to say, we still need to prayerfully submit ourselves to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Should the content of our prayers align with the desires of the Lord, we need not wonder if God will answer our prayers. Should we devote our prayers to the furtherance of God's word, we'll experience answered prayer after answered prayer.

So, what's the takeaway? Cowardice is the fruit of prayerlessness. Courage is the fruit of prayerfulness.

READ: Ephesians 6:18-20 (ESV)

To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

Pray for one another and pray for me that the gospel would be proclaimed with boldness. If we do not pray for courage, we'll be overcome with cowardliness.

Video Description:

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SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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